

## Chapter 2: The Planning Process

### Introduction

The planning process for this comprehensive conservation plan began in December 1997. Initially, members of the regional planning staff and staff of Shiawassee National Wildlife Refuge identified a list of *issues* and concerns that were associated with the management of the Refuge. These preliminary issues and concerns were based on staff knowledge of the area and contacts with citizens in the community. Refuge staff and Service planners then asked Refuge neighbors, organizations, local government units, schools, and interested citizens to share their thoughts in a series of open houses and focus groups.



Photo by Myles Willard

In 1999, the public was invited to open houses in January, February, and March for Shiawassee National Wildlife Refuge, Michigan Islands National Wildlife Refuge, and Wyandotte National Wildlife Refuge. Forty-two people attended open houses for Shiawassee National Wildlife Refuge in Bridgeport Township, Thomas Township, and at the Green Point Environmental Learning Center.

Another 25 people participated in focus groups representing environmental education, cooperative farming, hunting and fishing, and wildlife observation/photography use of the Shiawassee National Wildlife Refuge.

Service staff accepted oral and written comments at each open house and written comments were received in the mail after each open house. Thirty-two comments were received for Shiawassee National Wildlife Refuge.

### Issues

Members of the public raised a diverse range of issues. The issues raised by the staff and public are organized into themes – public use, resource protection, maintenance, and general – and are discussed in the following paragraphs.

#### Public Use Issues

Public use of national wildlife refuges requires a delicate balance. The mission of the National Wildlife Refuge System is to conserve, manage and, when appropriate, restore the fish, wildlife and plant resources and their habitats. Recreational uses that are wildlife-dependent and that are compatible with the refuge purpose are considered an appropriate way of enhancing people's appreciation for fish and wildlife. However, what constitutes compatible human activity is not always clear, and people's expectations of refuge activities vary considerably.

Participants in open house events and focus group meetings expressed a wide range of philosophies on public use of Shiawassee National Wildlife Refuge. Some people would like to see management of the Refuge focus on wildlife and habitat with no increase of public access and public use of the Refuge. Other people would like to see an expanded trail system and enhanced access for activities such as horseback riding, automobile tours, environmental education, hiking, hunting, fishing, boating, and bicycling.

The subject of airboats on rivers flowing through the Refuge drew a strong response from people who believe that the Refuge should provide a tranquil place to view birds. Airboat operators were described as having “disregard” for anglers and wildlife observers. Comments included concerns about safety on the river as well as the noise disturbance. Participants suggested a variety of solutions, including instituting a no-wake zone; expanding noise abatement codes; strictly enforcing wildlife harassment codes; and implementing horsepower or speed restrictions.

### Resource Protection Issues

Meeting participants voiced many opinions about the priority of resource protection issues. Some people said that enhanced law enforcement is a critical need, and others said that reducing the amount of sediment and chemical waste that flows through the Refuge should be a priority. Control of exotic species, such as purple loosestrife, round goby and zebra mussel, as well as invasive species such as phragmites, were cited as protection issues. Concern was also expressed about mosquito control. Prioritizing land acquisition is another expansion issue facing Shiawassee National Wildlife Refuge, according to open house and focus group participants.



Photo by Kim LeBlanc

### Maintenance Issues

Dike maintenance was the primary maintenance issue that emerged from the public involvement process. The need to maintain dikes was described as a top priority, particularly for dikes damaged by burrowing muskrats and, in moist soil units, wave action. Recognizing the role the Refuge plays in relieving flood pressure, people recommended conserving some areas of the Refuge as flood retention areas.

### General Issues

Some people said that the cultural diversity efforts at the Refuge are failing to reach targeted communities. Others suggested that monitoring of the Partners for Wildlife habitat restoration efforts is needed to evaluate what has been accomplished so far. Comments on revenue issues included statements that current staffing at Shiawassee National Wildlife Refuge needs more funding. Other participants questioned the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's plans to expand the Refuge when its ability to manage or maintain the existing wildlife Refuge is already a challenge.